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**Office of the Chief Information Officer
United States Department of Agriculture
Statement of Anne F. Thomson, Reed, CIO
Before the Sub Committee on National Economic Growth,
Natural Resources and Regulatory Affairs**

INTRODUCTION:

Mr. Chairman, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to talk about actions underway at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to reduce the paperwork burden on American citizens, and particularly on farmers. With your permission I will submit my written testimony for the record.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture delivers programs which daily affect the lives of every American, as well as millions of people all over the world. They include food safety and inspection; food and nutrition programs; programs to create jobs and support the infrastructure of rural America; natural resources and conservation; research and education; and, of course, programs to support America's farmers. USDA is committed to streamlining program delivery, while preserving fiscal integrity and preventing fraud, waste and abuse.

The Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995 directs the Federal government to minimize the paperwork burden for the public from the collection of information and to maximize the utility and public benefit of the information. The Act further directs Federal departments to reduce the

paperwork burden annually by 5% in fiscal years 1999 and 2000.

USDA INFORMATION COLLECTION HIGHLIGHTS

USDA uses information collected from the public to ascertain what services customers require, determine eligibility for programs and services, monitor compliance with statutory and regulatory requirements, monitor market conditions and develop statistics for the agriculture sector, prepare economic projects, foster research and improvements in agriculture and rural topics, provide risk management tools, identify and prevent plant and animal diseases, provide credit and technical assistance to farmers and rural communities, and evaluate customer satisfaction and program performance.

In Fiscal Year 1998 citizens spent approximately 84 million hours ¹ providing information to USDA and fulfilling record keeping requirements. By FY 2000, USDA estimates that it will reduce the actual paperwork burden to the public by approximately 6.9 percent which will bring the total hours to 77.8 million.

FARMERS AND RURAL AMERICANS

USDA has a number of initiatives underway to reduce the paperwork burden on farmers and rural Americans.

¹ In 1998, USDA had received OMB approval for 72 million hours. An additional 11.5 million hours of effort were required of the public for collections that were expired and had not yet been reinstated.

The agencies which deliver programs through USDA's county-based Service Centers - the Farm Services Agency (FSA), the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and three Rural Development agencies - are working collaboratively to develop common forms and to share information to reduce requirements for redundant information. Examples of projects underway include developing common geospatial maps and data that will enable greater sharing of land and crop information between partner agencies as well as external entities; an initiative to eliminate the need for customers to provide the same information more than one time by sharing it among agencies; and providing electronic, on-line information services to customers, employees, and partners of USDA.

In FY 1998 the FSA's Farm Loan Program area initiated a comprehensive regulatory and program reengineering effort. During the effort, which began in September 1998 and will conclude in September 2002, FSA's loan making and servicing processes, as well as documents associated with both the direct and guaranteed loan programs, are being reviewed to eliminate redundant and unnecessary processes.

As a part of this effort, the Guaranteed Loan Program was streamlined this year. The application form was cut from 12 pages to six and the amount of supporting documentation required was reduced. This resulted in 110,600 fewer hours spent by applicants on paperwork to apply for or be serviced in this program.

Recently implemented programs, such as the Small Hog Operation Program, the Dairy

Market Loss Assistance Program, and the Crop Loss Disaster Assistance Program, have also been deliberately structured to minimize paperwork requirements.

In FY 1997, the Rural Housing Service streamlined the regulations for the Single Family Housing (SFH) program. By developing one consolidated regulation and revising the associated information collected, the agency reduced participants' paperwork burden by over a million hours.

To obtain the full benefit from many of these projects, USDA must invest in new technology. The current computer systems used by the agencies in the Service Centers are not interoperable and therefore present a real barrier to information sharing. The President's FY 2000 budget proposal contains funds for accelerating the acquisition of the needed technology and continuing support for developing common business operations.

ADDITIONAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The food stamp program, administered by the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), requires 20 million hours of paperwork effort on the part of states and others who administer or participate in the program. The Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) transition to electronic benefits transfer technology is targeted for complete implementation in all states by FY 2002. During FY 1997 and 1998, over 1.5 million hours of reduced paperwork was realized as a result of this initiative. Continued work by the Food and Nutrition Service in FY 1999 and FY 2000 will achieve an additional reduction of 108,500 hours.

In FY 2000, FNS plans to consolidate the information collection requirements associated with the National School Lunch Program, the School Breakfast Program and the Summer Food Service Program. These program changes will reduce the duplicate reporting and recordkeeping burden resulting from the separate administration of the programs by eighteen percent.

In FY 1998, the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) streamlined paperwork requirements associated with the national weighing system under the U.S. Grain Standards Act and the Agricultural Marketing Act. A decrease of 449,000 hours resulted from allowing one request for services for multiple shipments, changing to a permissive program for domestic grain inspection certificates, allowing a qualifying certification statement, and removing unnecessary testing requirements.

In FY 1999, Rural Housing Service (RHS) will streamline and consolidate reporting requirements for the Multi-Family Housing program and implement electronic transmittal procedures for tenant information. RHS estimates reductions of a half million hours or 25 percent of the current paperwork burden. In FY 2000 and FY 2001, plans are in place to make similar changes to other RHS program areas, such as Guaranteed Single Family Housing, Single Family Housing- Mutual Self-Help Housing, and Planning and Performing Construction.

CONCLUSION

USDA has made progress in reducing paperwork. The Department will continue to work

toward full compliance under the Paperwork Reduction Act and toward achieving the goals set by the Act and OMB. We request your support for our requested FY 2000 budget increase which will allow the USDA Service Centers to continue to invest in modern technology so that appropriate information can be shared. With your assistance we will continue to move forward in delivering better customer service with minimal paperwork burden.